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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001891

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY COUNTING ON MUSLIM VOTE

REF: COLOMBO 1853

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Campaign strategists for Prime Minister and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) presidential candidate Mahinda Rajapakse told poloff in an October 27 meeting they were confident that votes from supporters of the Sinhalese extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) will give their contender the majority he needs to secure the November 17 election. The Rajapakse campaign's math does not add up, however, and the candidate will have to do more to broaden his appeal among minority Christians and Muslims if he is counting on their support to win. End summary.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE--
AS LONG AS YOU'RE SINHALESE

2. (C) On October 27 poloff met with Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) presidential campaign strategists Dulles Alahapperuma (a former SLFP MP from the southern district of Matara), Kanchana Ratwatte and Vindhana Ariyawanse. Not surprisingly, the trio professed complete confidence in the ability of their candidate, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, to secure victory at the polls on November 17. The PM will achieve this feat, according to Alahapperuma, because his campaign has "gathered all the diverse forces that not been part of the peace process" before--like the pro-Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Buddhist extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)--under the SLFP's commodious banner. The PM has succeeded in convincing these Sinhalese skeptics that "devolution is acceptable," Alahapperuma claimed, suggesting that the two chauvinist parties now have embraced the peace process. At the same time, he added, the JHU's pro-market orientation "evens out" the JVP's statist reflexes, thus offering something for everyone on the economic front. That said, Alahapperuma conceded that the SLFP platform guarantees "special protection" for certain key sectors, such as energy. The rhetoric in the manifesto notwithstanding, Ratwatte explained, the SLFP campaign accepts private university education "in principle" and is working hard to bring the JVP along. In general, the "JVP is much more flexible than before," he claimed.

IF IT'S NOT ONE,
THEN IT MUST BE TWO:
"UNITARY" VS. "UNITED"

3. (C) Alahapperuma discounted perceptions that the PM's position on the peace process represented a step backward from acceptance of federalism and substantial devolution for the north and east (Reftel). The real difference between Rajapakse's position (preservation of a "unitary state") and that of United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe (a federal structure within a "united" Sri Lanka) is semantic, rather than ideological, Ratwatte insisted. Since the Sinhala word for "unitary" ("ekiye") is the same as the word for "one," Sinhalese-speaking voters will automatically assume that any system not described as "unitary," or "one," must, by force of logic, be "two," or divided, he said. When asked to explain how Rajapakse interpreted the different words with respect to whether federalism could be part of a permanent settlement to the ethnic conflict, his campaign advisors did not answer directly, stressing instead that elements of a federal system are not new to Sri Lanka. In fact, Ratwatte went on, a federal system existed in ancient Sri Lanka, and a de facto "quasi-federal" state currently exists in the country, even though "the nomenclature is not there." (Comment: Despite several allusions to Sri Lanka's ancient Buddhist kings in Rajapakse's manifesto, this particular historical fact is not mentioned.) Even some countries with an openly federal system, such as South Africa, do not highlight the term "federal" in their names, he observed.

4. (SBU) When asked for specifics about how Rajapakse's

proposed "Jaya Lanka" program would be different from the tsunami coordination mechanism (known as P-TOMS) he had

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introduced into Parliament several months earlier, Alahapperuma explained that Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs would "negotiate a (aid-coordinating) mechanism" with the LTTE. The TNA MPs would also be "empowered to begin immediate relief operations" in LTTE-controlled territory, he said, adding that the PM had imposed an April 14 deadline (both the Sinhalese and Tamil New Year) for Jaya Lanka to begin operation.

CAMPAIGN OPERATIONAL TEMPO ON STEADY RISE

15. (C) When asked for an assessment of how the SLFP was faring, Ratwatte proudly produced a graph purportedly showing the respective "intensity" of the SLFP and UNP campaigns since August. While SLFP "intensity," according to the graph, lagged somewhat behind the UNP's in August and much of September, the SLFP campaign rises meteorically in mid-October (at a point intended to represent the October 18 release of the Rajapakse platform) and continues its relentless ascent until November 17. UNP "intensity," on the other hand, flat lines after mid-October. When asked what data points (e.g., number of rallies conducted, houses visited, leaflets distributed, interviews broadcast, etc.) were used in constructing the graph, Ratwatte was unable to offer any illumination, reiterating instead that the graph represented campaign "intensity." He acknowledged that the unimpressive graphic depiction of UNP activity after mid-October did not take into account possible plans by the competing campaign for a similar increase in "intensity."

16. (SBU) Before Rajapakse's formal nomination, Ariyawanse reported, the party canvassed house-to-house to identify the issues that weighed most heavily on voters' minds. (The answers: cost of living increases; peace process; corruption.) Rajapakse has constructed his campaign to respond directly to these concerns, the advisor said. (Perhaps in tacit acknowledgment of Rajapakse's potential vulnerability on the last issue, Alahapperuma noted that the JVP's "clean" image would help the campaign.) Another national door-to-door campaign is scheduled for November 4-6, Ariyawanse said, to check voters' reaction to the "Mahinda's Vision" manifesto (Reftel). The SLFP campaign will hold a total of 140 major rallies across the nation (except in the north) by November 17, Ratwatte said, and is now averaging four a day, with the candidate appearing at one rally daily. The UNP, in contrast, plans to hold 83 major rallies over the same amount of time, the SLFP'ers asserted. In addition to rallies, the campaign is capitalizing on Rajapakse's good-old-boy image by organizing a mobile exhibition of political cartoons featuring the candidate that will tour major cities.

OLD MATH:

SLFP COUNTING ON JHU VOTE BANK

17. (C) Acknowledging that Rajapakse's alliances with the JVP and JHU and his rhetoric on the peace process may have alienated Tamil voters, the PM's advisors asserted that he could still win the election without them. Ratwatte said party strategists were taking the 46 percent of votes won by the SLFP and JVP together in the 2001 general elections--when the Alliance lost--as the combined SLFP/JVP core vote bank. With that 46 percent in hand, Rajapakse would need only another five percent of total votes cast to win, Ratwatte said confidently, which the party believes he can easily get now that the JHU is supporting him. If Rajapakse wins only half of the almost six percent of votes garnered by the JHU in the 2004 general election, the campaign advisor explained, the SLFP will be just two percentage points shy of a victory. Pointing to the two percent of the vote captured by the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) in the 2004 election, Ratwatte declared triumphantly that the Muslim-friendly policies espoused in the Rajapakse platform, as well as his unflagging support for the PLO (the PM is founder president of the Sri Lanka Palestine Solidarity Committee), are sure to entice that critical swing vote. (Comment: SLMC Leader Rauff Hakeem's decision to support Wickremesinghe apparently was not a factor in these somewhat optimistic calculations.)

POLITICS MAKES STRANGE BEDFELLOWS:
JHU TO "REASSURE" THE CHRISTIAN VOTE

18. (C) The campaign advisors did not believe Rajapakse's support among Christian voters would be undermined by his electoral alliance with the extremist JHU, claiming instead

that "we're using the JHU to reassure the Christians" that their interests would not suffer in a Rajapakse government. When asked how the JHU (which has proposed constitutional amendments to criminalize "unethical" religious conversions and to make Buddhism the state religion) would be viewed as reassuring by Christians, Alahapperuma said that the SLFP was considering giving air time to JHU monk MPs to explain that they are not really anti-Christian. It is not enough that the conversion issue did not appear in the manifesto, Ratwatte acknowledged; the SLFP is also holding discussions with the JHU aimed at persuading the monk MPs to take "irritants" like the anti-conversion bill out of their agenda.

COMMENT

19. (C) The Rajapakse campaign's math does not add up. The JHU no longer commands six percent of the vote; most current estimates put it at less than one percent. The SLMC, moreover, has already endorsed Wickremesinghe, and non-SLMC Muslim voters in the east are unlikely to support the Prime Minister of an administration they believe did too little to expedite tsunami reconstruction. (The alleged involvement of Anuruddha Ratwatte, a former SLFP minister related to President Kumaratunga, in the murder of 10 SLMC supporters in the aftermath of the 2001 general elections may also dampen support.) Rajapakse's advisors' attempts to depict his campaign as an umbrella broad enough to accommodate a wide range of voters' competing interests ring hollow. Bringing the JVP and JHU along to accept devolution of power--a right hypothetically already granted to the north and east by the Thirteenth Amendment--could hardly be described as a critical step forward in the peace process. His campaign advisors' disquisitions into the subtle semantic differences between "united" and "unitary" notwithstanding, Rajapakse has never publicly endorsed a federal solution in this campaign, nor do we expect him to so as long as the JVP and JHU are sharing his stage.

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